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## OER - the clue is in the name.....or is it?

### Student Dissertation

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## SAT: OER - the clue is in the name.....or is it? (Rachel O'Connor)

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[Rachel O'Connor](#)  
17 December 2014

Review of some Open Educational Resources and the acronyms and specific jargon they contain. From the results of this review I will discuss how this shows how inclusive these resources really are.

### Extra content

### OER...the clue is in the name... or is it?

One of the key claims of the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement is that it can help to improve social inclusion. For example, the Open University claims that its OER initiative OpenLearn "aims to break the barriers to education by reaching millions of learners around the world". (Open University, 2014).

However, there are certainly question marks over whether OER is as inclusive as it claims to be. Richter and McPherson (2012 p.203) for example state that "most educational courses implicitly require prerequisite knowledge from learners. Which might or might not be equal in different contexts". This would imply that Open education is only really open to those who already have an educational understanding and not necessarily learners all around the world.

To reflect on this issue this paper will focus on one element which may be a barrier to OER inclusivity and that is the language used in OER. It will be argued that the use of acronyms and jargon can be an excluding practice in many professions and using this standpoint as a lens with which to explore the language of OER. As the title of the paper questions; does the language of OER help us to understand what it is about or does not knowing these acronyms or jargon, such as OER itself, exclude us?

Using some small scale research the paper will start to answer the question: How inclusive is the language of OER? It will then consider what this might mean for future research and guidance in this area.

This paper will summarise a small scale case study research carried out in this area. This research is a comparison of two examples of OER courses. Both examples are an introductory course into poetry, one from OpenLearn and one from MIT OpenCourseware. Selected sections of these resources have been analysed to reveal how much academic jargon and

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acronyms are used and whether there are common themes between the two courses. Using these findings social networking mediums have then been utilised (Facebook, Twitter, H818 student forums and emails) to circulate a survey to a sample of people, to find out how many people have understood some of the language examples found.

Reviewing these findings will allow discussion of how inclusive the language of OER is. From these findings recommendations can be made for what developers of OER may wish to consider in the future and also what further research may need to be carried out in this area.

References:

Open University (2014) available at: <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/about-openlearn/welcome-openlearn-free-learning-the-open-university> [online] (last accessed 15th November 2014)

Richter, T and McPherson, M (2012) Open Educational Resources: education for the world? in *Distance Education August 2012 vol.33 no.2 p.201-209*



[Rachel O'Connor](#)

16:27 on 11 January 2015 (Edited 16:27 on 25 January 2015)

Transcript for my H818 conference presentation can be found here:

[https://www.dropbox.com/s/q4jzl469570jq3a/OER Presentation Transcript.docx?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/q4jzl469570jq3a/OER%20Presentation%20Transcript.docx?dl=0)



[Rachel O'Connor](#)

18:41 on 3 February 2015

My Powerpoint presentation can be found here:

[https://www.dropbox.com/s/soco5rmuxu4qyhp/H818 Presentation\\_RachelOConnor\\_2.ppt?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/soco5rmuxu4qyhp/H818%20Presentation_RachelOConnor_2.ppt?dl=0)



[Rachel O'Connor](#)

14:45 on 12 February 2015

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[Sheila Greenwood](#)

3:03pm 13 January 2015 [Permalink](#)

Hi Rachel

I will be tuning into your slot at conference, not least because certain aspects of your topic appears to overlap with mine. It will be interesting to see your take on how certain language can seek to exclude some. Richter and MacPherson (2012) are also theorists that I have chosen in part of my presentation to emphasise the point that courses e.g. H818 imply that you bring to them a level of knowledge - the jargon of academic language being my point here because if you do not know this can exclude learning.

Good luck with your presentation

Sheila



[Lisa Kidger](#)

6:21pm 14 January 2015 [Permalink](#)

Hi Rachel

I really enjoyed completing your questionnaire and I'm looking forward to seeing your results.

Lisa



[Hugo Teixeira](#)

12:30pm 28 January 2015 [Permalink](#)

I have such a hard time explaining what I study and what sort of work I might like to do after I complete the MAODE. Only now has it occurred to me that this might be because of all the jargon involved. I'm very curious about your recommendations for OER developers and hope that they might help me refine my own descriptions of the work I do and might want to do in the future.



[Catherine Wilson](#)

5:16pm 28 January 2015 [Permalink](#)

Rachel,

Your poster is great and will have taken a long time to develop. I suspect your findings will be applicable to all of us and may even highlight some of us of our own views about how we are or aren't engaged. I am very much a believer of if you get the learning environment right at the beginning the rest will follow and this includes losing the jargon.



[Matthew Street](#)

6:16pm 28 January 2015 [Permalink](#)

Hi Rachel,

I find this really interesting, there is so much jargon and words that mean different things in different contexts, I recently trying to describe openness the other day in the context of education to my sister a secondary school teacher (in english) who was entirely confused by the language and words being used. We do seem to make it difficult for ourselves, that said though I couldn't find an easier way of describing it or a more appropriate phrase. So really looking forward to seeing your thoughts and research.



[Jane Ballans](#)

8:33pm 28 January 2015 [Permalink](#)

Love the YouTube clip...I'll be off to try Powtoon in a minute!

The concept of your presentation is really interesting. Can we attend all the conferences? The more I see the more I want to see, Now I wish I could start this course again, I'd get so much more out of the second time around!



[Grant Penny](#)

12:21am 29 January 2015 [Permalink](#)

Hi Rachel,

I find the topic of your presentation very interesting. Jargon is something that many of us have simply accepted as part of educational practice (and don't want to admit being confused by), but it is probably completely unnecessary and a barrier through intimidation. I hope I can attend your talk.

Kind regards, Grant.



[Rachel O'Connor](#)

12:14pm 30 January 2015 [Permalink](#)

I totally agree Jane. I was just saying to a colleague today that I wish I could just study my modules and not have to work full time! I find so much of H818 really interesting and engaging but trying to fit all the work in around our other commitments means I sometimes feel like I am just doing the bare minimum to get by and not always getting time to really delve into some of the topics. We are probably getting more from all the learning etc than we think



[Rachel O'Connor](#)

12:17pm 30 January 2015 [Permalink](#)

Thanks Hugo - I agree with trying to explain things to others because of jargon. I also think there is the fear that if you don't use the 'jargon' you will not sound as intellectual as you are meant to. From what I found out so far, I think my artefact and presentation are going to be more about the argument that this topic is just not researched enough. Hopefully small case studies like mine are a starting point for more to be done



[Sheila Greenwood](#)

3:42pm 2 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

A good angle to cover Rachel, I agree as both of us found out research into Jargon is still very limited.

The angle I am planning to cover in the presentation is more about how we need to create awareness about when and where to use jargon to maximise inclusion.



[Rachel O'Connor](#)

5:30pm 6 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

I agree totally Sheila - awareness is the key. This is kind of my main point to end my project - that OER developers need to be aware of the issue of language and jargon and the possibly barriers it creates. Even before finding ways to improve the use of jargon or get rid of it is the need to get people on board with noticing it is there in the first place.



[Dr Simon Ball](#)

3:33pm 9 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Here are the comments and questions from your live presentation at the conference:

- ▶ Jargon is a barrier to inclusion
- ▶ Lots of confusion on whether the OU is 'Open' in the sense of free to all! ;-))
- ▶ The text comprehension checkers don't really pick this type of thing up - do they?
- ▶ Interesting I have similar findings in that educational language is creating a barrier within education.
- ▶ I think a concordance programme might be interesting to search for context around a particular piece of lexis...
- ▶ Perhaps mastering the specialist language is part of being in a Community of Practice?
- ▶ I don't think there is a consistent language across the sector which causes even more issues
- ▶ you might find the discussion of confusion in defining reusable learning objects useful to refer back to.
- ▶ Is this indicative of a wider issue with Academic language...
- ▶ In online learning it's easier to look up meaning of terms as opposed to feeling 'caught out' in a face to face environment
- ▶ Do you think that the problem of jargon lies within awareness to the audience in that it depends on who you are corresponding to and with?
- ▶ What is the difference between subject specific technical terms and jargon?
- ▶ Should we be prepared to change the language to suit the audience to improve uptake
- ▶ Would you recommend any particular style guide/ guidelines for plain English. I use the British Dyslexia Association guide-good for everyone in my view
- ▶ Think we should include glossary if we use specialist terms or acronyms
- ▶ Readability function in MS Word also quite good



[Rachel O'Connor](#)

6:46pm 9 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Thanks for posting these comments and questions Simon. It is great to see how interactive everyone has been during the presentations. I will try my best to answer a few of these:

- ▶ Perhaps mastering the specialist language is part of being in a Community of Practice?

I believe that when a community of practice is built then specialist language may become part of this but I think the important thing is to remember that these communities need to be built from the ground up. Therefore, there has to be a chance at the beginning or as new people join that specialist language is not expected to be understood. This takes time. If you are expected to know this from the very beginning it might put you off wanting to join such a community

- ▶ I don't think there is a consistent language across the sector which causes even more issues

I agree with this and I think this sometimes stems from that fact that there can be confusion with jargon and so it is used incorrectly and over time this just grows and grows so no-one is talking the same language anymore! I mentioned different acronyms meaning different things in different contexts but there is the danger they are meaning different things even within the same context of education. I worry about the danger of this and the wrong interpretations could have dire consequences if we are not careful. The more acronyms and jargon we use - the more chance of these getting mixed up.

- ▶ Is this indicative of a wider issue with Academic language...

I worry that it is in two ways. We are so caught up with having to analyse everything in education now and this analysing/assessing which is time being taken away from actually teaching and learning is forcing teacher/tutors to use acronyms and jargon for speed.

I also think that for some reason academic language has become entangled with management/business language as education becomes increasingly more commercial and the use of jargon is an unfortunate overspill into a world where it maybe does more harm than good.

- ▶ Do you think that the problem of jargon lies within awareness to the audience in that it depends on who you are corresponding to and with?

I think audience is the key issue in all of this but am not sure many educational institutions know or are sure who their audience is. They want to compete commercially so use jargon etc to sound businesslike, they want to compete in scholarship terms so use jargon to sound intellectual. I think they have forgotten the audience should be the learner. More needs to be done to see what the needs of the audience is and ensure resources are suiting those needs.

- ▶ Would you recommend any particular style guide/ guidelines for plain English. I use the British Dyslexia Association guide-good for everyone in my view

I have yet to look into guidelines such as these but plan to explore them further for my artefact. I think if I am arguing that OER developers should be thinking more about the language they use it seems only fair to make suggestions about how they can do this.



[Sheila Greenwood](#)

12:50pm 13 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Hi Rachel

It was good to see your presentation last week which in many ways covered the same ground as mine in that we both sought to highlight the barriers that educational jargon can cause to inclusion.

Your medium being through the context of Open Educational Resources (OER) questioning the possible effectiveness of an OER because of the possibilities that can occur with the lack of understanding. Mine through personal experiences.

Both I thought reached the similar conclusions in that it takes time to understand a specialist language and audiences may be at different levels. The amount of jargon/specialist language is increasing due to time constraints and new technological devices- text speak etc.....ever widening the gaps.

I agree with you that audience awareness is a key to the amount and level of language used. The Guides that we both picked up on i.e. The Campaign for Plain English and the British Dyslexia Guide are testament to the problem that Jargon can cause.

One interesting observation I saw in the replies to questions above is that you noted the problem of Jargon as stemming from business. I hadn't looked at it as that way around, coming from the business environment I actually had viewed the problem as being in the academic profession. Very interesting perhaps the problem is not professionally specific but just language development in general. A topic for another time perhaps.

Anyway I have chosen your presentation as one for review in my EMA.

Kind regards

Sheila



[Sheila Greenwood](#)

2:46pm 16 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

**Review of Rachel O'Connor's Presentation OER, the clue is in the name..... or is it?**

**By Sheila Greenwood.**

In my view this presentation title is aimed at the correct audience, i.e. a conference entitled "open education in an open landscape".

Comprising of twenty good quality uniformly eye catching slides with easy to read text and good grammar the presentation is clear in that it tackles the topic of inclusion within the scope of Open Educational Resources.



The presentation was delivered in a seemingly slick, well rehearsed manner, and with a good pace for the audience.

The first slide in the presentation is eye catching, drawing the viewer into the topic of the presentation in that perhaps Open Educational Resources (OER's) might not always deliver what they are intended to do. This arguably has the effect of opening questions in the audiences' mind as to how this might be.

Straight away the question as to the point that OERs may have barriers to inclusion in the form of excessive jargon is addressed.

The rationale provided for pursuing this topic was that very little research in the area of language could be found. I believe this to be true as the topic of this review is similar to my own; being specific jargon used in education. I too struggled to find relevant current literature and statistics.

The research aims are well stated, in that research questions were aimed at finding out how many acronyms and how much jargon is included in two examples of OERs. Also how much did people understand regarding these jargonised words.

Initial findings are clearly stated in % terms and a brief explanation is provided as to the results.

What is less clear here is how the particular OER's and words were chosen for the research.

Problems in terms of the scope and timescale of the research carried out are stated, particularly the fact that the sample size was small, excusable perhaps given the short timescales allowed for production but something that can be worked on going forward.

The interesting anecdotes from family members who didn't understand the questions, and therefore would not do the questionnaire both served the point to highlight the problem that jargon can cause whilst amusing the audience.

The initial conclusions in the presentation are perhaps enough to suggest that high awareness of OER courses and the relationship to the low uptake may have something to do with the type of language used and the barriers it may cause to understanding.

The author admits that research is small scale and mainly due to networking within the group, this suggests that a better survey result is possibly necessary for more accurate results.

Thought has been given to and expressed by the author on how this experience has taught her some useful lessons, i.e., the importance of research planning and better explanation of tasks required.

Ending the presentation with a quiz that reinforces how an audience can misinterpret language was arguably a good move here, it highlights the fact that people need to know their audience when communicating. Given that most of the audience got the question wrong reinforces this message.

An interesting presentation. How will this be developed further for the project

artefact.....?



[Rachel O'Connor](#)

3:02pm 17 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Thanks for such a comprehensive review Sheila. It is very useful to see my presentation through someone else's eyes. You have also got me thinking about changes I might need to make to my artefact in light of your comments. Thanks



[Sheila Greenwood](#)

6:08pm 17 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Hi Rachel

Yours is one of the presentations I have chosen to review for the EMA because the topic of jargon is similar but we chose to present in different ways. Not sure if the review is suitable the EMA and I may need to pad this out a little with added info along the way.

Do you think I have the right tack or perhaps gone off on the wrong thinking tangent about the presentations intended purpose?

You can be cruel to be kind with any suggestions.

Thanks

Sheila

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